

the ToneQuest Report™

The Player's Guide to Ultimate Tone



Golden Throat... 1964 Blackface Pro



Fender designed and built more than one transitional, non-reverb blackface combo amp that would soon acquire

reverb and a new name, including relatively small numbers of blackface *Princetons*, *4x10 Concerts*, *1x12 Vibrolux* and *1x15 Pros*. We acquired a *1x15 blackface Pro*, and while it ultimately proved to be an extraordinary *exceptional* amp, we were also reminded of the potential pitfalls that exist



when buying old amps sight-unseen, as well as the potential rewards.

We found the '64 *Pro* listed on *eBay* and bought it from a dealer after requesting a detailed photo of the chassis and circuit. Proudly described as "the best amp

in the store, "the rare '64 blackface *Pro* is essentially a blackface *Vibroverb* without the "verb." Do we have your attention yet? Three caps had been replaced, the original baffleboard had been professionally converted to plywood with the original grill cloth remaining intact, and an on/off pot had been installed for the tremolo intensity control that bypassed the tremolo circuit when rolled to "1" with a click, adding gain that would otherwise be missing in the Vibrato channel. We pulled the *JJ* power tubes and assorted Russian preamp tubes and replaced them with lightly used, "test new" *RCA*s from our stash, rebiased the amp and fired up the *Pro*....

Sounded like shit. We had been here before with a dead-mint '64 *Vibroverb* bought years ago that had passed



through a certain amp guru's hands in Pflugerville, Texas. How could a vintage *Fender* sound so *bad* we wondered? Turned out that the value of the bright cap on the Vibrato channel had been changed on the *Vibroverb*, rendering a

thin, scalding tone that would have given Ed Jahns fits, as it did us. Changing the bright cap back to spec immediately restored the *Vibroverb* to its rightful pace in history, but the *Pro* had other problems....

The baffleboard swap and added switch on the tremolo intensity control were clues that someone had also spent time troubleshooting the amp, probably trying to detect the cause of the *Pro's* weak output, thin tone and curiously harsh edgy distortion. The amp just didn't sound right. We pulled the original, reconed *Jensen C15N* dating to 1964 and subbed in an *Eminence Legend*, but the *Pro* still sounded choked-off, linear and wrong, so it was off to Jeff at *Bakos Ampworks* on the



Friday afternoon before Memorial Day weekend in a frog-chokin' Georgia thunderstorm. *When the going gets weird, the weird turn pro*.... Now, this is the difference between someone who really knows his craft and a hack.... Jeff plugged his bench guitar into the *Pro*, hit a couple of

chords, issued a single grunt of displeasure and caustically observed, "Something is definitely fucked up." With the chassis on the bench, Jeff scowled at the choppy sine wave the amp produced on his scope as he checked voltages with his multimeter. "I think the output transformer is going down slow—it measures 11 volts and it should be reading 16...." He clipped in a substitute OT from a stout old *Fisher* hi-fi, plugged in and hit a chord... "That's closer to what it's supposed to sound like...." And sure enough, the missing lows and mids were present, the raspy treble tones were subdued, and for the moment, the *Pro* showed promise. **We**



called Paul at **Mercury Magnetics** and ordered a blackface *Pro ToneClone* replacement transformer, shut it down and wished each other a good holiday.

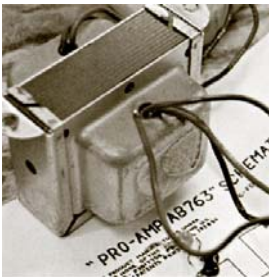
A week later the **Mercury Magnetics** replacement output transformer had arrived. Jeff wired it up, and then turned his attention to three silver mica caps that had replaced the original ceramic caps in the phase inverter and tone circuits.

Jeff: "Somebody probably read an article about how these would bring the high end up, but I prefer the ceramics—always have. Besides the effect of the voltage from the old output transformer being low, these silver mica caps were contributing to that brittle tone we were hearing. They are the wrong value, and they changed the entire sound of the



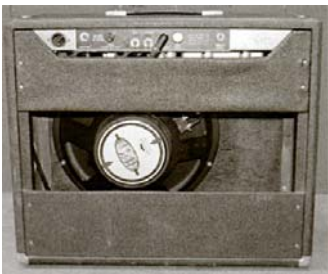
amp.” Jeff pulled all three silver mica caps and replaced them with the correct ceramic disc caps, and since an on/off switch had already been installed for the tremolo, we mounted the 25K midrange pot in the back panel hole for the extension speaker jack. With the *Pro* now thoroughly put right and the midrange pot added, Jeff hit a few chords, moved the EQ and volume settings around a bit in both channels, smiled and said, “That sounds really good. Yeah, that’s it.”

Back in our music room, the final step was to re-bias the *Pro* at 34mA with an *Amperex* GZ34 rectifier and our last pair of vintage *RCA* blackplate 6L6s, which in unused, *new old stock* condition have soared to \$400/pair. The re-labeled Tube NOS *Phillips* JAN 6L6 WGBs we had tried sounded good—but the smooth warmth, exceptional musicality and deep harmonic content of the *RCA*s just can’t be beat, and it is a difference you can definitely hear. Smoke ’em if you got ’em....



We lit up the *Pro* with the ’63 *Fender Reverb* unit and reverently smiled at the jaw-dropping tones pouring from the big *Eminence Legend 15*. Imagine the sound of a slightly kinder, warmer sounding 40 watt *Super Reverb* void of the sharp, penetrating treble presence that has so often left our ears ringing for

hours after a tumble with a blackface *Super*. The sound of the ’64 *Pro* is *all Fender*, with solid bass that doesn’t fall apart at high volume as the smaller blackface combos can, sweet, singing treble tones, and now... a midrange control that can gradually push the amp beyond its original, clear and liquid “scooped” midrange voice to an exceptionally thick, “mid-Atlantic” roar that unleashes heavy sustain and rich, musical distortion as only a *Fender* can. The *Pro* brilliantly complements every guitar we own, producing the essence of classic *Stratocaster*, *Tele*, *P90* and humbucker



tones with clarity, depth and lush fidelity that literally fills the room. Yes, there are different and equally worthy tones to be had from the British classics, but we have never heard a more beautiful sounding or versatile *Fender* amp—one that can range from crys-

talline, blackface clarity to the full burn of an early blonde *Fender Bassman* at much friendlier volume levels. The *Pro* can get plenty loud, but it’s a loud that doesn’t kill you in the style of a *Showman*, *Twin* or a *Super Reverb*.

The irony in this unexpected discovery has not escaped us, and perhaps the weight of it is now becoming clear to you, too. This project did not begin well, and we confess to experiencing some remorse when the *Pro* arrived with a few bad mods, weak and thin from the original output

transformer going down, and generally just sounding very wrong. Our dismay was soon displaced by genuine enthusiasm; however, as we were reminded that this is indeed what the quest for tone is all about it. We’ve acquired absolutely bone stock amps in perfect working condition that just couldn’t tote the note, so why should we expect to buy a 44 year old amp that’s been played without it needing a little repair and restoration work? The end entirely justifies the means.

Having finally experienced the *Pro*’s singular, exceptional sound, we wondered what had caused it to be relegated to



such obscurity among all the *Fender* blackface amps. Like the *Vibrosonic* and *Vibroverb*, perhaps it was doomed by the presence of the single 15” speaker.

Like the *Pro*, the blackface *Vibroverb* 1x15 was produced for less than a year, and with the introduction of the 2x12 *Pro Reverb* in 1965, *Fender* would no longer produce a 1x15 combo until the introduction of the silverface *Vibrosonic* in 1972. Yet, the earlier 1x16 *Pros* had been *Fender*’s flagship amps during much of the tweed era, and in 1960 the 1x15 brown *Pro* ranked second only to the 1x16 *Vibrosonic* in the *Fender* catalog. Somewhere along the way, the 1x15 combo had clearly fallen out of favor with *Fender*, guitarists, or both, and given the short lifespan of the *Vibroverb*, even the addition of reverb couldn’t save it.

Twenty years later, Stevie Ray Vaughan elevated the *Vibroverb* to hall of fame status, otherwise, the 1x15 combos seem to have been perceived as “uncool” for anything but jazz and blues, as if wearing a jacket and tie were required to play them. The *Pro* is a great blues amp, but it’s also a great rocker, and equally well-suited for jazz, pop



and country. With far more clean headroom and power than any tweed *Pro* and much stronger distortion, sustain and dynamic character than a brown *Pro*, the blackface *Pro* reflects *Fender*’s ongoing pursuit of

more powerful, cleaner sounding amps, but unlike the blackface *Bandmaster*, *Tremolux* and *Showman*, and *Pro* can *really* rock the house cranked. We suspect it’s a single 15 and missing ’verb that throws people off today, yet in ’64 *Pro* shares its DNA with the ’64 *Bassman* and all the highly prized blackface combo amps, including the *Deluxe Reverb*, *Vibrolux Reverb*, *Super Reverb* and the heavily prized and hyped *Vibroverb*.

The contrast between the *Vibroverb*’s Holy Grail status versus the lowly blackface *Pro* simply underscores how easily we can be blown off course by what isn’t hyped on the Internet or in print, and by the powerful logic that suggests

if anything 44 years old is truly noteworthy, “we” would already know about it. Well, apparently “they” don’t. But you do. Blackface *Pros* can be found for \$1 500–\$2,000, with originality and overall condition driving prices accordingly. Like the *Deluxe*, we wouldn’t buy one that has had all the blue molded capacitors or *Allen-Bradley* resistors replaced, but the transformers available today from **Mercury** will sound every bit as good or better than the originals, and as we have said so many times in the past, the *Eminence Legend 15* is spectacular. Add some good,

current production or NOS tubes and you will have been delivered to a place well beyond the common man’s limp and shriveled imagination. Now *Quest forth....*

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